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# Indicted Officer Gets Strong Israeli Backing

## *New Assignment Sours Ties With U.S.*

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JERUSALEM, March 3—A new storm in U.S.-Israeli relations is brewing over the fate of Air Force Col. Aviem Sella, one of Israel's most decorated war heroes and the man who allegedly recruited Jonathan Pollard to spy on the United States.

Last week Sella was given a new senior posting, which Israeli officials refuse to disclose but which is said by sources here to be the command of the country's second-largest air base. Today he was indicted by a federal grand jury in Washington for his role in the Pollard affair.

Sources here say the timing of Sella's new assignment was no accident, that his supporters in Israel's military establishment wanted to send a clear signal to him and to other young officers that those who perform delicate tasks for the state will not be sacrificed and that Sella's career would not suffer.

But the assignment has sent a very different and disturbing signal to American officials, who said they believed they had extracted a firm pledge from Israel in 1985 that it would "call to account" Israelis who had participated in the Pollard spy ring.

This pledge was questioned when Sella was made commander of the Rimon air base in the Negev last year and when Pollard's chief "handler," Rafi Eitan, a former counter-terrorism adviser to the prime minister, was appointed director general of a major chemicals firm here.

Washington reacted to Sella's new posting by sending its top diplomat in Israel—charge d'affairs Arthur Hughes, substituting for vacationing Ambassador Thomas

Pickering—to meet with Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin to express "deep concern" and to warn that U.S. Air Force officials would find it impossible to work with Sella while he is under indictment.

Rabin denied today that the United States tried to veto Sella's new assignment. He also told reporters it was "total nonsense" to claim that the Pollard operation had official sanction, and repeated Israel's contention that it "was an exception and in contradiction to the long-

standing policy of Israel not to carry out espionage activities against the United States."

"We believe that we have carried out our own commitments in regard to this case and it is painful to us that the issue is continued and dragged [on] and we hope that there will be ways to remove this source of problems in the relations between our two countries," Rabin said.

Israeli sources said Rabin was **already aware of American concerns and had decided to give Sella the new posting while denying him a promotion to brigadier general.**

The compromise apparently has satisfied no one. U.S. officials said they believe Sella's new assignment indicates that Israel has reneged on its 1985 pledge and is further evidence that the Pollard ring was not a "rogue operation," as Israeli officials have characterized it, but rather had official sanction, as Pollard has claimed.

Israeli defense officials charge Washington is attempting to interfere in internal Israeli affairs by seeking to dictate Sella's future.

"We have different norms in Israel. We don't hire and fire from the hip the way you do in the United States," said a senior official, who asked not to be identified.

Sella's involvement in the Pollard affair has puzzled some who know him here. He won prominence for his part in the 1981 raid on an Iraqi nuclear reactor and for his role in planning and executing the destruction of Syria's ground-to-air missile defense system during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. He was considered a sure bet to become commander of the Air Force.

He was on a study leave at New York University when Pollard asked an associate to arrange a meeting with him, according to a federal summary of the evidence against Pollard presented last June. At a second meeting, Pollard reportedly told Sella that he wanted to work as an Israeli agent. Sella became his first "handler," according to the summary.

Sella has refused to comment on the case, as have military spokesmen. The military spokesman's office tonight would not even disclose his age and rank, saying such personnel matters are classified.